'Space Drawing'

Alexander Brodsky, Mark Dorrian & Richard Anderson

‘SPACE DRAWING’: A CONVERSATION WITH ALEXANDER BRODSKY

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This discussion was held in April 2015 on the occasion of Alexander Brodsky's visit to the Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture as George Simpson Visitng Professor. It is presented here as a prelude to Issue 02 of Drawing On, exploring the related themes of Surface & Installation.

Brodsky, who has been described as Russia's greatest living architect, is renowned for his remarkable drawings, installations and architectural projects. Mark Dorrian holds the Forbes Chair in Architecture and Richard Anderson is Lecturer in Architectural History at the University of Edinburgh.

Alexander Brodsky, Mark Dorrian & Richard Anderson

‘SPACE DRAWING’: A CONVERSATION WITH ALEXANDER BRODSKY

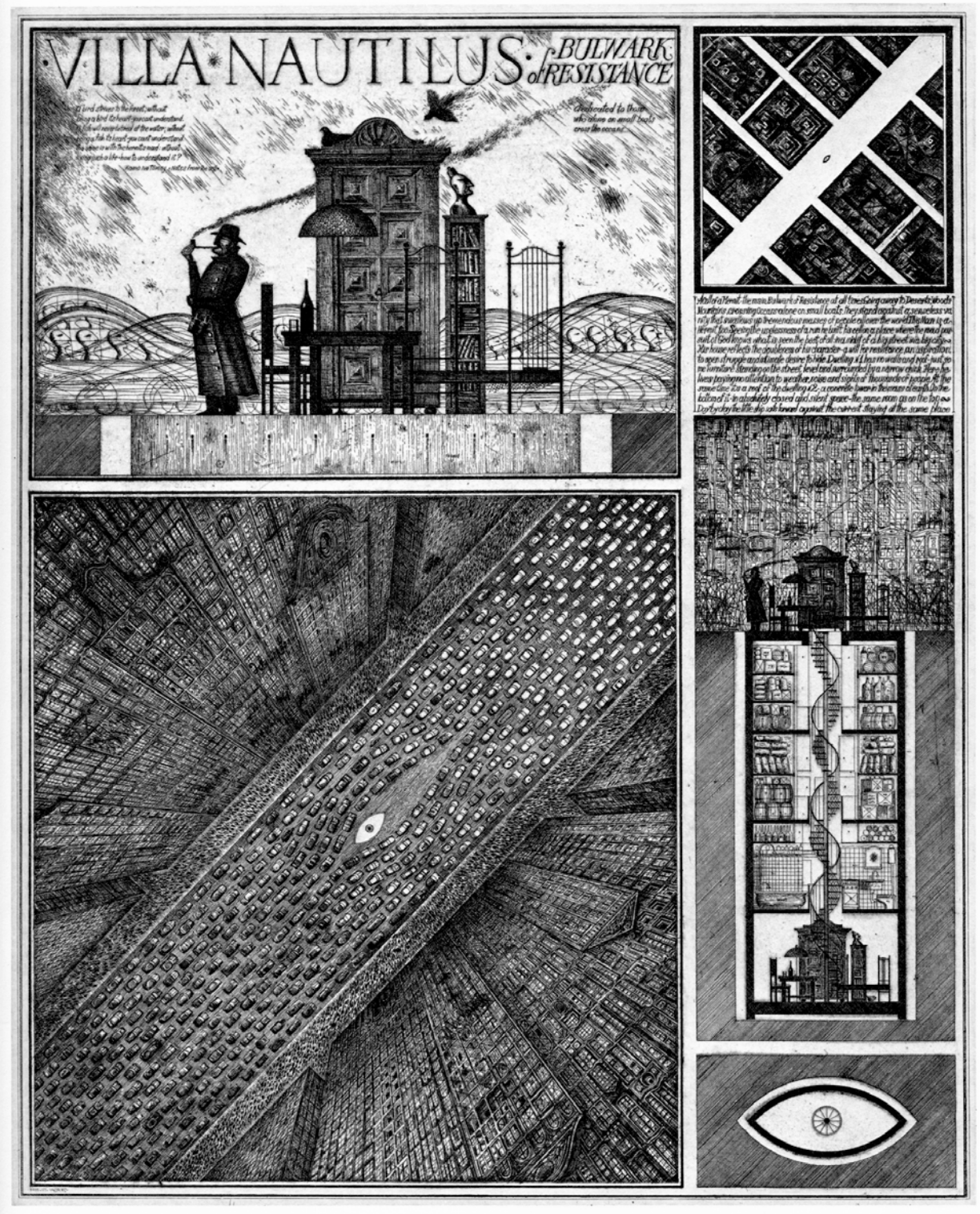
Mark Dorrian: This is not a very structured interview set-up… but we thought it would be very nice to be able to talk around the work a little bit. And I suppose one of the things that I wanted to ask you, something that has always been in my mind about the work, is that in a lot of the projects I see a kind of interest in depth. It’s in the early works, such as the *Villa Claustrophobia* or the *Villa Nautilus*, with its depth condition down into the subterranean. Or in a way, it is there in the skyscraper, the glass tower building, as well as the high, or deep, sectional condition that we see in the glass bridge in the mountains. I think it is there in quite a few of the installations – so things like, again, the Vienna installation, with the reflection, where you use the oil and the light coming from above to produce the effect of a deep, vertical condition. I also think it is reinforced by the format of the etchings that were published in the Brodsky and Utkin book – they’re almost always portrait as opposed to landscape orientation. I wonder, well, first of all, if you think the observation is correct, and then if you have any thoughts about where that particular interest in the deep, sectional condition comes from.

Alexander Brodsky: Yes, this is correct. The depth is really an important thing for me. So, when I was making etchings – this is kind of a mysterious technique – depth, really on a fair piece of paper, when you have to press the drawing, you see it gives you the feeling of really deep space behind the paper. I don’t know how to explain it. For me it is always mysterious. And this is what happens with etching. Partially that’s why I was so concentrated – concentrated on the etching technique. Every time that I press the paper it is a wonderful feeling that even if you don’t like the drawing itself, it still has some space inside. In the installations, probably I don’t think about it, but it happens mechanically. I am trying to keep this feeling of the drawing, the etching, in the three-dimensional work. So, I can say that I’m trying to bring the depth of the etching to the three-dimensional pieces. And it’s not easy. Sometimes I just fail, but sometimes it’s working.

Richard Anderson: Can I follow up on that? Do you see that kind of exploration of depth that you’re describing between, you know, the etched plate and the paper also reappearing in some of the more recent work? I’m thinking of the clay reliefs that are shown at your current Berlin exhibition. Is that part of the same exploration?

AB: I think so. The flat reliefs, because of the texture, have this feeling of depth although the clay surface is quite flat. But probably, partly because of the cracks that are unpredictable, it gives the feeling of a drawing when you come close. It’s also the effect of the difference when you observe it from the distance and then you come very close and see tiny details. I like this feeling very much – the closer you come, the more you see. And of course this Vienna installation, with this reflection, is also an attempt to bring the quality of etching into big scale, three-dimensional work. So, it’s kind of a drawing. Space drawing.

MD: I hadn’t appreciated that before, but absolutely – because when you talk about etching, we also think about the ink and the reservoir, you know, and the relationship between the plate and the imprint. So etching is a kind of



01:
Alexander Brodsky & Ilya Utkin, *Villa Nautilus*, 1990.

doubling, as well – first of all the drawing is doubled in the engraving, but then the image from the print doubles in a reverse way the engraving. So when we see the Vienna installation, we think about the etching and we think about the oil reservoir, the pool, the doubling of the reflection, the relations... and there's this interplay between flatness and depth. The relation seems very strong.

RA: Following on that, one of the things that strikes me about so much of the work is precisely this relationship that I think you're describing, between what you see at a distance and what you see up close. And it seems that a lot of that has to do with the texture, you know, the texture of the image – whether it is the print from an etched plate, whether it's the texture of the clay that's drying in unexpected ways. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about this texture, because it seems to be a great focus of the work, whether it's the texture of the lines, the drawings, or the texture of text that is part of so many of the images. Do you feel that this relation between near and far, when you observe the images, is part of the work?

AB: I think you're right, yes. Like this text, from the distance it's just a spot. When you come close you see it's text. But in the etchings, its role is just one of the spots in the whole composition, I think... I don't know if I'm understandable [*laughs*]. So, yes, that means I try to use everything to make this etching deeper. And you're right that these letters within this composition forms some dark spots – and then you can see that you can read it, and it gives another sort of depth.

RA: One of the things that strikes me just now, which I hadn't thought of before, is the way that so many painters have used text – you put text on the surface of a painting and it automatically almost creates a depth behind the picture plane. And I can't help but think of some of Malevich's early paintings – *An Englishman in Moscow*, for example – with these kinds of devices. Do you feel like those kinds of traditions are at work, maybe consciously or subconsciously, in this textual relationship?

AB: Well, I don't think that Malevich really influenced me, although I like his work very much so maybe I don't understand it but somehow it goes into my works. In the etching series I was mostly, of course, influenced by Piranesi, who is really the champion of depth. Several years ago I was at an amazing show of his work in Venice. You probably heard about this exhibition. I especially went to Venice with my son to see it. It was a huge exhibition of all his prints together. I knew most part of these images already, but it was completely different from the book because it was crazy deep, every picture. And they made an incredible thing for this exhibition, a very nice animation of his Prison series. There was a big screen and you could fly through these spaces from one picture to another – and they really made it look like one huge space with different rooms, and so you were flying here or there. It was very nice.

MD: Again, I think an important aspect of the etching process here is the fact that material is literally being removed – you know, the plate is being worn away by the stylus in the act of engraving, and then by the acid that eats into the exposed metal. And this makes me think of reused objects in your work, and the importance of materials that are worn, that carry the textures and traces of previous uses, such as the doors in *Rotunda* (2009) for example, and how they seem to have something of the same quality of the etching. They almost seem etched themselves – etched by the history of... [AB: By time] Yes, by time. You know, there is almost a kind of sympathetic relationship between the process of etching and this use of worn materials and artefacts, and this seems a way of transporting the qualities of the etchings into the constructed work.

AB: Yes, you're right. Using these old things like doors and windows – I do it not only because they are beautiful, but also because they really give depth of time to the structure. One door can say a lot of things, and you can feel how old it is, how many times somebody opened and closed it. Every piece has an amazing, interesting history. It's probably not a good way to work, but... [*laughs*]. It's maybe too easy to use this thing for giving depth to the whole structure, but it works perfectly.

MD: And it produces a similar visual effect, a visual relationship between the distant and the close – a reading that, I think, works in a comparable way to the experience of the engravings...

Could we talk a little bit now about the city, and about cities, in your work Alexander? In the early work – that published in the Brodsky and Utkin book for example – the presence of the city, and of the city as an almost imaginary site or location for the project such as we see in the *Villa Nautilus* project, seems very important. I was

02:
Pavilion for Vodka Ceremonies,
2003, ArtKlyazma Art Festival.

wondering if you could talk a little bit about the city as a site of the imagination in this work, and how it might relate to specific cities of your experience?

AB: It's a very important thing for me. I was born in a big city and grew up in a big city. So it's somewhere deep in my body, the spirit of huge city. I have lived there all my life, except for years I spent in New York, which is even stronger, in this way. So, of course, the big city is an important part of almost every drawing, like in this competition series – a lot of city images. And, in some way I see this, it's a mysterious thing, every city. A lot of mysterious things you can see, maybe not from the first moment, but then there are also a lot of secret spaces that you probably never see, but you know are there – like the huge spaces below the streets in Moscow, built around a hundred years ago or in Soviet times, for some military reasons. A lot of them are not in use so it's quite difficult to get there, but people know that they exist. In some way I saw life in a big city like life in the forest. You know some roads and some places, you know the road to your friend, to the other friend – there is a number, sometimes a very big number, of ways you use. And this reminds me of one little house, the other little house, and the forest. You go this way, you come to your friend, and from there you go to some other place. This is a big part of life in a big city.

RA: That's a beautiful image of a city as a kind of mental landscape, if you will, but it also has a narrative element to it, something fantastical as well. I wonder if I could ask something about some specific images, some specific cities, which also seem to appear in much of the work and that have a similar quality. I'm always struck by the echo of Venice, you know, and the gondola – the kind of city with rivers running through it. I mean, how important is that imagery, or that specific place as an idea, to the work?

AB: Well, it's quite important for me. I don't know why, but a long time before I first visited Venice I had this image, the image of the river together with architecture. It's really important for me. I made large number of drawings about the river, which is constantly moving, and then the architecture is always standing in one place. And this combination of something moving and something stable – this is an important thing for me. When I first visited Venice it looked exactly as I had imagined – almost no surprise. Of course, it was a big surprise altogether, but this feeling of buildings standing almost upon the water is a very strong thing.

And, talking about this forest, I just remembered that there's the image that I always have in my head from when I was a little boy. I read this wonderful book "Winnie the Pooh" by A.A. Milne, and they have this funny map. Each of them lived in the trees, in the forest so they go to this friend, they go to that one – and this is a kind of inspiration for me [*laughs*].

MD: I think it's interesting as well, because Venice is a city that is, above all, a city of the imagination – one from which other imaginary cities are generated. I suppose we think of something like Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, for example, in which it turns out that the protagonist, Marco Polo, who is supposedly describing the cities within the Great Khan's empire, is in fact re-describing Venice every time. So it's a city that seems to imaginatively generate incessantly other cities. It's also the city that is most characterised by doubling – it's the city and its reflection; or the city between sea and the air, between Hermes and Neptune; or between earth and water (the Lion of San Marco with its feet on water and on land). So, it's a city that seems to generate narrative and stimulate imagination – it has played that role. But in terms of the specific figure of the gondola itself – it is certainly a very strong emblem for Venice, but it's also a mythic object as well, one that might carry connotations of the dead – of crossing over to the space of the dead. There are certainly depictions of Venice, which show the gondola in this way. I'm thinking of a painting of a Venetian night scene by John Wharlton Bunney, a nineteenth-century artist that Ruskin knew well. In it, the gondolas are like – well, you know, they are from the underworld, crossing over to this other place. Which makes me wonder about the quality of the silhouette. So in the Canal Street project in Manhattan (*Canal Street Canal*, 1997), whenever you make the gondolas, they're silhouettes, they're… [AB: Flat, flat gondolas] shadows. And I was wondering if the mythic quality of the boat, or the river, as a threshold between what is here and what has passed, between life and death, had particular consequence for you?

AB: Yes, yes, this is what I mean. This river, it's quite… every time it's a very symbolic thing. It's a kind of obvious and banal thing, but still, it's like this. It's a symbol of time, like a visible piece of time that's always moving, and it changes the surroundings. So the river's always the same, but what's standing near the river is changing – ruining, disappearing. New things become built on this space, but the river is always the same.

RA: I was struck by this particular image, a print that was on display in Berlin in a recent exhibition, which includes both the gondola and another motif that I think appears in many of your works – an empty chair, often within an enclosure. I think of the recent bus shelter in Krumbach in Austria, for example, which is also the kind of large chair that is in the enclosure on the gondola. One has a sense that maybe this idea of sitting in chair, protected, awaiting something, has something to do with the experience of time? Is that part of what you're thinking?

AB: Sorry, I don't understand.

RA: So, the gondola is on the water, which evokes a kind of passage or experience of time, and then there seems to be a place on the gondola, which is prepared for somebody but is empty and absent – but it's also somehow protected, you know, in the cage... [AB: Yes.] And I wonder if that is about a kind of specific relationship to the passage of time?

AB: Yes, in some way it is so. The chair is empty, and this is an important thing, as you said. So it's a place for Charon to cross the river... but he left [*laughs*].

MD: So it's the ferryman himself who has left the chair? That's interesting. I wanted to ask you, Alexander, about what might be described as the allegorical aspects of your work. I'm using this to refer to a kind of work that stands for something else – a story or a condition – but not in a direct way, so an effect of opacity is produced. So, we think of works that use particular kinds of symbols or stories or narratives for talking about things in an obscured way. There's always a certain mystery or enigmatic quality – it's something in it's own right, but at the same time we also feel that there's a depth or consequence behind it that we struggle to grasp. So, there's a kind of burden of interpretation, I suppose, around the allegory that we have to bear, without ever feeling that we arrive at a complete and satisfying interpretation of the work – instead we always feel that we're involved in a series of attempts at interpretation. Certainly, in looking for instance at the *Villa Claustrophobia* drawing, for instance, I feel a sort of interpretative challenge – is it about the predicament of the individual in relationship to mass society, or about a certain condition of vertigo, or about the city and fantasies of release from it? I haven't been aware of the term allegory being much used in the way people have written write about your work, and I was wondering if it was something that you had considered or if it has any consequence for the way that you think about the work?

AB: Oh! Well, I'm not sure I'll answer the question, but it's a very important thing for me – the mysterious part of architecture. I am talking about the drawing and the building – the real building. It's very hard to explain, but all the buildings that I really like have some mystery, for me. It's not like I understand everything. There's a lot of buildings that I don't understand: how they built it and how could an architect design such a thing. And what did he mean? With some buildings you see it, and you know immediately what it is, and how it was built. I don't know, maybe it's not a good example, but I come to a big supermarket and although I don't know everything about it, generally, philosophically, I understand it. But when I see a palazzo in Rome or in Florence – I can come close, I can touch it, but there is a big, big mystery for me. And even in some contemporary architecture I see examples with this quality. For me, the works of Peter Märkli are in this part of architecture. Sometimes it's very simple, absolutely, but I feel something mysterious as in the famous museum of sculpture that he built – it's full of mysterious qualities. Although it's just a kind of absolutely simple concrete box, when you come near you can feel something very strong about it. It's a very mysterious place. So it's hard to explain, because it's to do with intuition. But for me it's very important. So of course when I draw architecture, I am trying to give this feeling – you're not quite sure of what it is. You like it maybe because of the graphic and compositional and some other qualities – the quality of etching; but at the same time, generally, there's something not very clear. You want to ask something about it. So you're thinking about it – you ask questions to yourself, you look for the answer.

RA: I was going to ask about these mysterious qualities. One of the things that strikes me, for example in, say, Vinzavod, the wine factory in Moscow, is that is has this incredible mysterious quality. I've read about it, sometimes, as a very nice preservation project, so as not to demolish it, but was the intention to preserve this mysterious quality of the original structures there?

AB: Yes of course. We try to keep as many things as possible. Well, firstly it was not possible to destroy it, to build something new, because it's a monument – it's historical heritage. So even if you wanted to do this, you couldn't. And of course, we didn't want to do that. We

03:
It still amazes me that I became an architect, 2011, Architekturzentrum Wien, Vienna, Austria.

04:
Coma, 2000, Marat Guelman Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

wanted to just use the space, make small additions, but keep the whole atmosphere. However, in some way, we didn't do this. There are some places that I am not satisfied with, but generally... We didn't finish the project unfortunately. This was a very sad experience because we made a big project and then the realization was stopped at some point because they changed their mind. They didn't have enough money, so it was half-made. This is how it exists... for several years. But still, I'm glad we managed to keep some places absolutely the same, although they're used for some little institutions... but basically it's the same. We added some small, small, almost invisible things to adjust it to this art centre.

MD: Are stories important in the work, Alexander, stories told about the project – but perhaps about the spaces in which the projects appear?

AB: Yes, we can talk about this series of competition entries. It of course consists of many different components, and literature is one of them, so we used sometimes pieces of poetry when it really explained the idea, and put it there. Or a little text, right there, usually very short. But another thing that needed to be done in this competition was to put all the sense of the project in not more than a hundred words, which was one of the rules. So, even if we didn't want to do this, this task to keep it, to make a very small text with a lot of sense, gives some poetical quality.

MD: Yes, the projects seem at times like a kind of folklore, a kind of contemporary folklore about the city. So, the story of a man who lives in the middle of a road, for example, or a man who lives underground. They're kind of emblematic individuals or conditions which, although they're told about contemporary conditions or urban situations, seem connected to an old tradition of storytelling as well.

AB: Yes, I even call them architectural fairy-tales... so, the fairy-tale is always behind...

MD: It makes me think of Chagall, you know, Marc Chagall the Russian painter... [AB: Yes, of course, of course] with these magical peasant scenes – animals and...

AB: Yes, in some way... I was very much inspired many years ago when I first saw Fellini's *8½* and this strange structure in the air with no use, just a beginning of something that never happened. This was a really big influence, an influential thing for me, for many years.

MD: Do you see yourself as part of a Russian tradition or would you avoid describing your work in that way? Is there a sense of strong inheritance? Certainly in your lecture last night you spoke about the houses on the outskirts of Moscow and a kind of everyday vernacular that is disappearing with the construction of new apartments and other buildings. So I suppose maybe that's one sort of specific relation – but in terms of a longer history of Russian literature or art or architecture, do you feel strongly part of a tradition like that?

AB: I don't know... although the work was made in Russia. It is Russian, but it's not some exact tradition that I take from... I think it's something else. What was really important for me, which influenced me very strongly, is the poetry of Joseph Brodsky. The first time I read it, I was really amazed by his poems, and somehow, since that moment, they really influenced what I was doing. And in some of his poems he has this amazing combination of antique Rome and contemporary things. So this was important for me.

RA: One of the things that I wanted to talk to you about is the way the work you're doing right now, both with the architecture practice – designing and building buildings – and also the kind of work that was shown recently in Berlin, is linked. Do you see those as connected or separate kinds of your work – you know, on one hand the continued etching and the making of reliefs and installations and, on the other, the architectural work? What is the relationship is between those? And then, how you see the work that you're doing now in relationship to some of the earlier conceptual projects with Utkin? Do you, for example, feel you're pursuing some of the same things? Do you see your work kind of branching out into slightly different territory, with the built work and then the work that has more of a fine arts quality?

AB: Well... I guess this is my main problem in what I'm doing, because it's still divided in two parts: the artistic part and the architectural. When I make some small temporary pavilions I'm absolutely free and this part of architecture – if we can call it architecture – is strongly related to these etchings and conceptual projects. It's definitely part of it. But when I'm making someone's commission, like the living house, it becomes really difficult. I always think

that now I will make something related to this artwork, but I don't think I am very close to it... it's still far. It's very difficult, because I start working with a client and eventually this is also, always, a competing thing – the architect's ego. This is a banal thing, nothing new, but still... the architectural ego of the architect who wants to make something extraordinary that will be published in a magazine. But to make simply a comfortable space for living for these people – this is always more important for me. I think about this family, go into the small details of their life. I know their kids and I design special rooms for them and if they don't like something that I want to use, if they really don't like it then I don't use it. I know a lot of examples when the architect wanted to do something, and then the people who were going to live there they have to, somehow, adjust their lives to architecture... and it doesn't always work. I know examples when the architecture is a beautiful thing, very unusual, but it's not possible to normally live, to normally live inside. And the clients started, sometimes, and when they couldn't live in it, they sold it to other people – and maybe the other people are OK there, or not. So this is a very difficult thing – a problem for an architect. And it's still divided for me. Some houses that we build are much closer to this quality, but some are not. The nice life of the client is always more important – so I go so far in these details that sometimes I forget about the artistic quality [*laughs*]. It's hard to keep everything in your mind at the same time – a structurally good project, safe and comfortable, and at the same time architecturally interesting.

RA: How does this relationship between the ego of the architect, the ambition of the project, and the client play out in some of the commercial projects you've worked on? I think of the *95 Degrees* restaurant or interiors like *Ulitsa OGI* (both 2002) and these other places. Do you feel you've had more room to explore some architectural themes in those kinds of projects?

AB: Yes, of course. Like this restaurant, it was for me definitely not a commercial project, it was a kind of sculpture. But of course, I thought about the kitchen and the tables, and people going back and forth, but here I really think I was successful in putting some art into an architectural project. And it is the same thing with the interiors of these clubs and cafés, a few places that were made in Moscow. The clients are my very good friends and here it was interesting because they usually call me and say: "We rented a really depressing basement... [*laughs*] and we don't have money. But we need something extraordinary, cosy and nice for people." This was an interesting thing – no money, terrible basement, so I had to invent something. And we did these places and they were really popular – a lot of people were coming. Until it was closed. So this is easier but when you meet people and they want to make a four-bedroom house, it's much more difficult.

MD: But this is interesting. Thinking about the work that you showed in the lecture, there are, on one side, the speculative projects and the installations, and then on the other there are certain building projects – but there's a category in the middle, in which the two really seem to come together very strongly. And they seem to do that partly because they are temporary, they are understood as temporary constructions – but of course often temporary constructions turn out to be more enduring than supposedly permanent ones. So we have... well, there's obviously the pavilion for the vodka ritual; there's the rotunda with the doors within the landscape; there's the 95 degree restaurant as well. All these are under the sign of the temporary – and because they're temporary, the stakes change a little bit. Some things perhaps become possible; or maybe the regulations get a little bit looser; or things become, you know, negotiable in a way that they would otherwise not be. And I think that's a very special zone of the work, a very special point at which the architectural and the art practice come together in a powerful way. And somehow, because these are coded as temporary – whether they're temporary or not, I mean: they may be more permanent than any – it allows a kind of space for these aspects to meet.

AB: Yes, maybe this is one of the ways to do nice things – to make them temporary, but strong enough to be more permanent [*laughs*].

MD: Yes. In Paris we can still see Le Corbusier's *L'Asile Flottant*, the Salvation Army barge, which was temporary, but which is still there and has outlived many of the so-called 'permanent' projects.

Could, we talk a little bit about clay as a material, and importance of clay in the installation work?

AB: Yes, of course. You can see it's a very important material for me. I started working with clay many years ago, when my friend and I received a commission to

make a big sculpture for some museum. And at that time we were working in a big sculpture factory, and clay was used as a first model, as a temporary thing; then they would make the plaster mould, and then cast it in plaster, and then take this to the other factory and then make the final thing in bronze or stone. So the clay was the very beginning and they always used it, because one of clay's amazing qualities is that you can make anything, dry it, and it will be quite a finished thing – but then you put it in water and it's clay again, so you can use one piece of clay ten thousand times for different things. For me it was really conceptually very interesting. I saw how they make clay monuments – huge Lenins and soldiers, and all these sort of things – and then they take it apart, add water, mix the clay again in a big machine, and then another sculptor would take it and make another Lenin [*laughs*]. So I wanted even to make some installation, based on the idea that this clay sculpture could be Lenin's ear, or his foot, or his head. And then it could be the soldiers' weapons – and now I make some other strange thing, but maybe in some time it will become something different. So this is one quality of clay.

The other is that it's really easy to work with. It doesn't resist at all – unlike stone, unlike making engravings, or things like that. Maybe it's not very good, but if you keep this strange feeling – that you can take this piece of clay and make it whatever you want, any object, very easily, then it dries and it exists like a sculpture, very fragile... like dust. So this feeling that everything that I make can become dust and then clay again gives some interesting effects. And this is partly why I like to work with it. And, well, the first man was made of clay [*laughs*] so it's also a very important material. But I see objects made of clay, without firing, they always give this feeling of temporary life – everything is temporary. And this is a kind of symbol of time, for me. And, visually, I think it's very beautiful. When you fire the clay it dies. It becomes very hard and stable, but something important leaves it. This lively, strange thing becomes a pottery or some ceramic art but it's really different. So I made some... I fired pieces a few times. It was a commission to make something stronger. It was interesting how they came back, came out of the kiln – they were kind of dead.

MD: Yes, that's something to do with the quality of the surface as well, because when fired the surface becomes sealed... [AB: Yes, yes] and, you know, loses its sense of porousness.

AB: It is no longer... it stops breathing.

MD: Yes... that's interesting.

RA: That seems also to lose some of the mysterious quality that seems to interest you. When it's fired you know how it's going to exist. When it's unfired it will continue to age and crack, and change in its own right.

MD: It's as if, I think, we understand the clay object that's unfired as something provisional or contingent, or that even might be destroyed or sacrificed in making of a 'permanent object' – as in the tradition of beginning in clay sculptures that will turn out to be bronze. To make something in clay monumentalizes it – but in a very contingent and provisional kind of way. So in the *Grey Matter* (1999) table, for example, where we have, you know, a toy rabbit or a sewing machine or a smoothing iron or a woolly hat, all domestic and familiar objects that are placed together, we see them in a different way because of the material transformation – but it's not as if they're cast in bronze or something, it's not as if they've become fully monumentalized. Instead, they've become frozen, represented in a very contingent way. In a sense, we feel, not that they're permanent, but that they've been made more fragile and precarious by the making. I think it's a very special kind of effect, which the unfired clay produces.

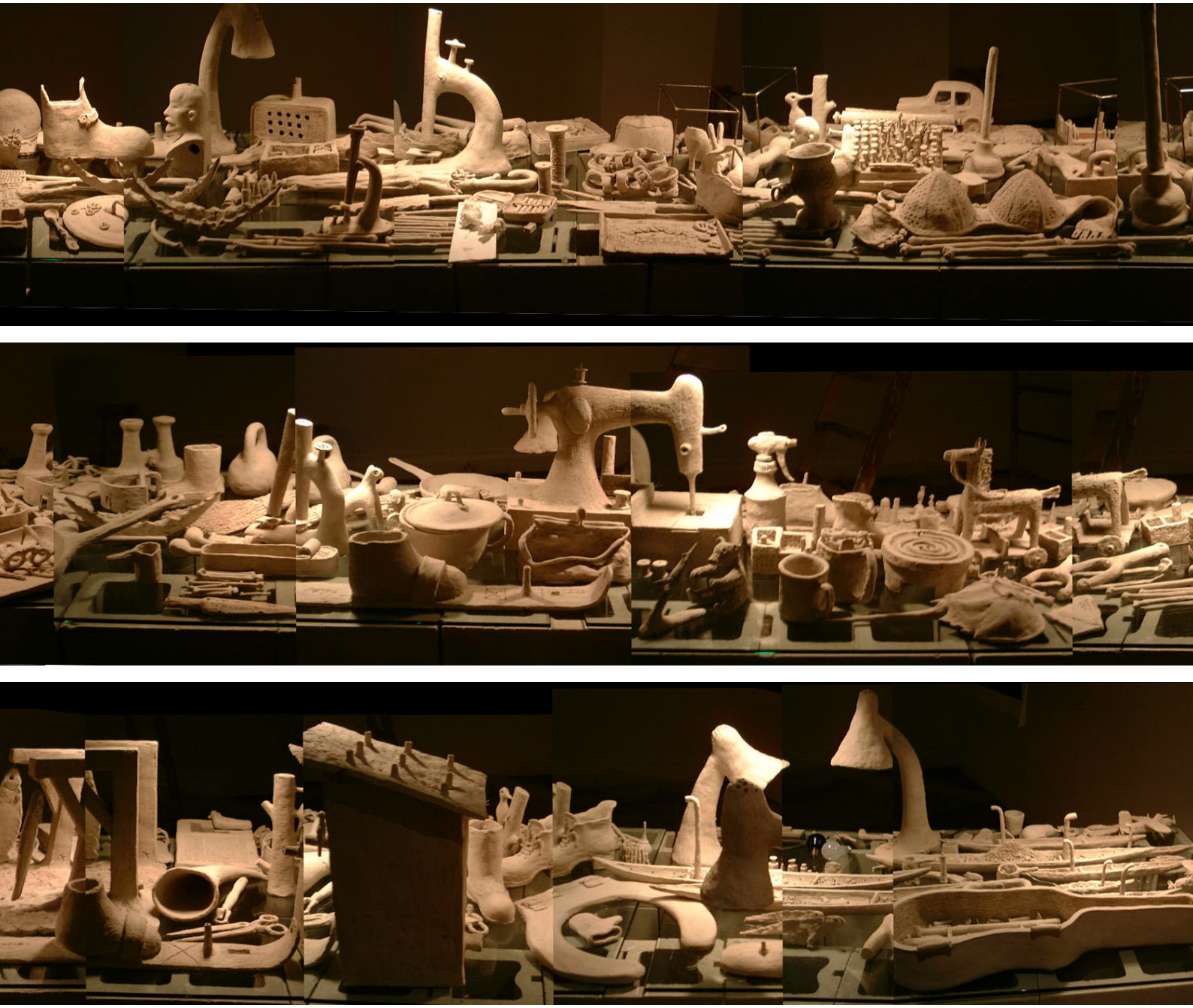
AB: Yes, yes – in some way, this is the material that can be used for making memories... as physical objects.

MD: Was it important when you were making the objects that they were approximately the same size as the things that you were remembering? So the sewing machine is about the size of a real sewing machine, and the toy rabbit is about the size of a toy rabbit, and the model of Pushkin is the same size as the model of Pushkin that you were remembering – or did they in fact transform in size as you were making them?

AB: No, all these everyday objects are the same size, more or less. Maybe with some mistakes, but basically, they're the same size, like the real objects. But of course I made some that were not from everyday life – like the Egyptian pyramids. The sections of these – it was just a beautiful thing for me, with a lot of meaning. And probably some other things – like huge glasses, among other objects, which were this big [*gestures*]. But mostly they were

05:
Facades, 2013, Triumph Gallery, Moscow, Russia.

06:
Grey Matter, 1999, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery, New York, USA.



the same scale, like the real objects. And I made a lot of buttons – hundreds of different buttons because they're really easy to make [*laughs*]. But they're beautiful.

RA: The question of scale is interesting to me. In some of the recent work that, at least at first glance, seems to be less about architecture than landscape, there seems to be a shift in the scale of the graphic work. Do you sense a change in the scale of the kind of etchings that you're doing? Is that related to a different theme that perhaps you've been pursuing in some of this work?

AB: You mean if we compare the scales of etchings and... ?

RA: Well, I'm thinking of a comparison between, say, the some of the landscape etchings that were recently exhibited and the single-sheet etchings that were part of the early conceptual project series. There seems to be a different relation between the image and the size of the print. I wonder if you could talk about that.

AB: Yes, of course it's important, this play of scales – and it's one of the things that interest me. This comparing of something huge – like, I don't know, a galaxy – and the small detail. Well, it's also kind of an obvious thing but how they connect to each other... small details are very important for me. And of course when I make a button somehow I think how it looks like in the universe. Well, in simple words, the last installation – I made it very recently in London, about a month ago – was completely about this. It was in a basement, the Ambika exhibition space (University of Westminster). It's really high – about fifteen meters – a huge space under the ground, which was originally used as a laboratory for checking building constructions. For instance, using huge cranes they would take some big construction element and throw it on the floor. They would need this height. And then they left – for some reason it was not in use. And then it was transformed into an installation space. So I was asked to take part in this group exhibition – four artists – and I asked at the beginning that they gave me a big... well, it was just like a quarter of this space, and they wanted to use the height, because it is so unusual. So I made a plastic volume – not as big as I wanted because they decreased it a little bit – but still very big, very high like a huge cube about 10 meters high and 10x12 meters on the floor. And we put this translucent plastic that they use on the façade of buildings that are being repaired, this white plastic to make walls and ceiling so it was completely isolated from the others – one little door and even empty like this, it was really beautiful. You came in and it was like being in a church – huge, and this light coming through. And I put there five pedestals of concrete blocks and some models of ruined cities – not exactly, but some clay boxes with some walls inside and a lot of very, very tiny pieces, like ash, like ash everywhere. There were five of these things in the space, with the lamps, so the light was concentrated. It was a very low light... and these five spots were illuminated with little lamps, so you would see these very, very small clay things, like the walls, and inside the walls these kinds of ashes, very tiny bits and pieces. And it was my idea to make people – but of course it was not enough, not big enough, but still it works. You concentrate on these tiny details, and then you see it is lost in a huge space. And it really worked, put together. But it is really impossible to photograph. I tried, but it is kind of fragmented in the photograph – you don't understand it. It may be good for video but I didn't have a camera with me.

MD: I wanted to ask about the work of John Soane and his famous... [AB: The museum] house museum.

AB: It's the most amazing place.

MD: Because I see, more than in any other example that I know of, a correspondence with your work – the interest in the compaction of those fragments as they appear in the museum [AB: Yes, yes], and also the way they are held within an architectural setting.

AB: Yes, I learned about this space about ten years ago, and then I was waiting for the moment that I could visit. And when we went to London, I immediately went to this museum. I was really astonished. So I think it influences me, of course, in some way.

And what is interesting, the man who founded this architectural drawings museum in Berlin, where my show is now, is a Russian architect – very powerful and successful, a very nice guy. Once we were drinking together, talking about architecture. I had just come back from London, and I told him about John Soane's museum. He never heard about it, but he said: "Well, I'm going to London very soon." And afterwards he called me and said: "Thank you so much; because it changed a lot of things." And that was the start of his idea to make this museum in Berlin. So in the beginning it was the impression of John

Soane's house – and he was really strong enough to build this museum, which is incredible.

MD: For his lectures at the Royal Academy, Soane had these incredible models made out of cork. I was reminded of them when I saw the clay models that you have been making – the subsiding building, for example – and the quality and detail of their surface. Soane used cork, which is a very soft and pitted wood, because he wanted to convey the feeling of the temples as ruins, their breaking apart – and the effect is a little bit similar to the breaking clay... [AB: Yes] in the subsiding model. It feels like it comes out of a deep history. In a way the material feels already worn, as if it's carrying the marks of a complex history. But also this interest in the emotional or affective power of compressed fragments, which form a sort of dense architectural accumulation – one has the feeling of that very, very strongly in the way pieces are organised in the Soane museum. But also I think again of things like the Viennese installation (*Architekturzentrum*, Vienna, 2011) with the elements compacted upon one another, where it's almost like an archaeology of everyday life, or even a section through a waste or a refuse site. Or the installation that you made with architectural fragments in Pittsburgh (*Palazzo Nudo*, 2010). Or even the *Grey Matter* project, where the elements aren't spaced out in individual plinths, but become pushed together and jostle one another – they push and they drag each other because of this spatial compression that they have. It becomes hard to talk about them in terms of an order any more. It's not as if each one has a completely defined place that it might occupy in relationship to everything else. It's more as if everything is displaced and finds a surprising relationship. We find a pyramid beside, I don't know, a little Pushkin or Lenin's head, or something. It's like a strange dream, in which we find new relations between things...

AB: There was another thing. I once used this installation, *Grey Matter*, for a commission, some time after the installation. It was interesting. I received a commission in Holland for some big, mental hospital for old people. They had just built it and, according to the law, they had some percentage of the budget for art. And it's a huge building, with a big atrium. There was a jury that consisted of half artists and half doctors and staff from the mental hospital. So they had altogether to decide if what I proposed was OK for these people or not. So I suggested three big glass cases on wheels, with shelves and a lot of these same clay things from everyday life, and they said it's probably very good for these people. So I was making them at the studio, somewhere in Holland, and then they brought everything to the hospital and I was invited to install it. That took several days. And they told me that it works well – patients would come and look, and they could recognise these things from their previous life. And I made even more complicated things – I still don't understand how I made them from pieces of clay. I made a children's tricycle at full size size, among other things. There were a lot of pieces – not as many as in the installation, but the cases were full of these. Or some old-fashioned machine for mincing meat that my mother had – and a lot of other things. I saw photographs and videos of how the patients, sometimes on a wheelchair, would come and smile seeing these things. And there was a funny thing. I lived there for several days. So they gave me the room, the same room as these guys, with all the equipment for these wheelchairs and everything. So I spent three days living in this place. There was a huge atrium where I was supposed to put my pieces and once I was really late, sitting there and thinking about the work after everyone went to sleep, and suddenly two women appeared with very strange faces, and they came very close. I could see they were really nervous and frightened – they were from the staff of the hospital. And they said: "What are you doing here?" And I said: "Just thinking." "Why are you not in the room?" I said I just wanted to think and I had a little bottle of something with me. I didn't understand from the beginning what they meant, but they thought I was one of the patients. And it's maybe quite a dangerous situation for them because there was nobody, only two women... and a crazy person. So they were standing like this [*gesturing*], ready for anything! And I said I'm not one of those people. "Who are you?" they asked. I said: "I'm an artist from Russia." And I understood that this made it even worse [*laughs*]. Completely mad – an artist from Russia.

MD: As if you had said I'm Napoleon, or something... [*laughs*]

AB: So it took me like ten minutes to prove that I am an artist from Russia, and then they relaxed a little bit.

MD: We should probably finish here. It's been great.

RA: I think that's a pretty nice ending to our conversation, thank you.

AB: Thank you.

FIGURES

01 Brodsky, Alexander & Utkin, Ilya. 1990. *Villa Nautilus*. From Projects portfolio, 42 x 31 inches. Photograph by D. James Dee, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

02 *Pavilion for Vodka Ceremonies*. 2003. ArtKlyazma Art Festival. Courtesy of Alexander Brodksy.

03 *It still amazes me that I became an architect*. 2011. Architekturzentrum Wien, Vienna, Austria. Image by Yuri Palmin. Licensed via Flickr Creative Commons.

04 *Coma*. 2000. Marat Guelman Gallery, Moscow, Russia. Courtesy of Alexander Brodksy.

05 *Facades*. 2013. Triumph Gallery, Moscow, Russia. Courtesy of Alexander Brodksy.

06 *Grey Matter*. 1999. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery, New York, USA. Courtesy of Alexander Brodksy.